



As you wander gently through elementary memories, you'll likely recall a teacher or a classroom event that left a strong impression in your mind. Something that stuck.

In my experience - the only experience I feel certain about - one of the more animating contrivances I played a role in was on a cold Minnesota morning in 4th Grade music class at St. Pius X Catholic School.



In 4th grade we had a few important tasks. In the adroit hands of Sister Mary Humilitas, come Hell or high water, our class was to learn to sing Catholic High Mass and Christmas hymns in Latin, a dead language used only in Catholic ceremony. In addition to capacious rehearsals and the daily *do-re-mi*, we were to learn to read sheet music. Many educators believe in repetition - learning by brute rote memory works well at this age. Sister Mary believed in building well-rounded students. God had a plan that conjoined 9 year olds and Latin. Sister Mary Humilitas was installed by the Lord to mold us to that plan.

At St. Pius X, each day began with mandatory attendance at Mass in the church. Three-hundred youngsters all dressed the same, all caterwauling supplicant responses in unison.. in Latin. No one understood what it meant.

Mass was followed by the first classroom session - Religion-101. Each session focused on sins, sinning, and what one might do to escape the sin cycle. Sister Mary Humilitas painted a dark picture, calculated to induce fear and obeisance.

Religion class was followed by Music class, held in church choir loft. We'd march in sub-zero temperatures, scurrying to avoid frostbite. Thirty sets of frozen toes tramping up to God's music annex. To my formative mind, it was all so surreal.



Sister Mary Humilitas arranged us into a typical choir formation. Sopranos, altos and tenors were the most talented and mostly girls. Although, in 4th grade, boys had yet to approach sexual maturity so a few of them were included amongst the high pitched.

The rest of us were decreed as baritones and bass, the low end in the vocal trade. Delegated to the back rows, we were musically necessary but only barely so.

Sister Mary deemed me supernumerary. Assigned to the bass section - the last row on the left - farthest from salvation - I'd been abandoned in musical Limbo.

Thanks to Sr. Mary Humilitas, I was tucked safely out of sight and, she imagined, out of mind. But, Sr. Mary didn't count on my undiagnosed ADHD and the ongoing havoc my disorder would inevitably generate.

I'd been cited several times in Grades 1-3 for my inability to focus on the task at hand. I'd been branded as trouble at a tender age, but Sister Mary hadn't bothered to read my St. Pius X dossier. She was new... unprepared.

After two sessions where we poured over proper pronunciations of difficult Latin verses, I'd decided the time was right for 4th grade hijinks. Having been relegated to the back row, it was go big or go home. Fortunately, I'd been placed between my best friend, Tom and the girl of my dreams, Connie. Tom shared the back row with me gladly. He and I shared a common interest - disruption.

It wasn't clear why the angelic Connie had been consigned to the nose bleed section. For a time, I considered that Sr. Mary had ordered Connie to act as a calmativie. But her lovely proximity acted only as an accelerant.

By the end of the first week of rehearsals, I'd surreptitiously obtained what was commonly referred to as a Whoopee Cushion, an air bag outfitted with a nozzle. The cushion was a large model, guaranteed to provide the aural fireworks I required.

As Sister Mary Humilitas drilled "Adeste Fidelis" I made my move. While the tenors occupied Sister's attention, I placed the cushion under my left foot, stomping my leg sharply downwards. The result - a Southern wind bellowed, echoing sharply across the empty knave of St. Pius X church. Much tittering followed the percussive roar. Sr. Mary Humilitas barked, "Who did that?"

As the giggling class turned in my direction, the plot was exposed. Catholic school kids are lousy at keeping secrets, disloyal under the slightest pressure.

Sister Mary Humilitas reconsidered her previous strategy. "Mr. Hartman," she shouted. "Please join the sopranos up here in the front row. I look forward to your contribution," she sneered.



The crude boys, still slumming in the rear guard, suggested the priest be called in to burn sweet incense against the flatus I'd unleashed. This brought on another bout of cackling which, in turn, enhanced Sister Mary Humilitas' exasperation.

"Children....children," she exhorted. "There's a great deal we need to learn. This is not the time for Tom-foolery."

I felt the opposite was true. Now was the time to pour gasoline on the fire.





Moving quickly as short legs might carry me, I caught up with the group as they filed into the loft. Sister Mary snarled as she glanced in my direction. I feigned conversation with my unrequited love, Connie, to disguise the precise nature of what was about to unfold. The nuns could read minds if you let them. But I was a tabula rasa.

Sister Mary Humilitas was under the impression that moving me into her direct line-of-sight would stave off mayhem. She imagined my instincts would be corralled by her close, watchful eye. She failed to understand the depths to which I was willing to sink in search of mischief.

As we were young and easily distracted, Sr. Mary always used a pitch pipe to remind us of the first note we were about to regurgitate.

“Children...CHILDREN! Listen up. Next we will run through the Kyrie. We begin with the Middle C.”

On the next day, when it was time to march to church for Music class, I held back. For reasons I prefer to keep private, I knew Sister Mary kept a spare pitch pipe in the middle drawer of her desk. As she distractedly shuffled kids out the door, I stole my way to her desk. Agitated and excited, I seized the instrument, tucking it in the breast pocket of my St. Pius X-Approved Uniform shirt. The pocket had an iron-on patch depicting Pope Pius X flogging the merits of our school.

With that she blew a perfect Middle C on her pitch pipe and started to count us in. “A One, a two, a three...”

On the 3-count, I placed my pitch pipe to my lips. Quite accidentally, I blew an F-Minor... a dissonant key at odds with the Kyrie. My fellow choristers were perfectly confused. The sound? A melodic agony - like cats mating in the alley. Sister Mary instinctively knew something was amiss. After three more downbeat attempts to start “Mea Maxima Culpa”, she spotted me putting hand to mouth just as the singing was to commence.

“Mr. Hartman,” Sister growled. *“What’s that you’re holding?”*

“It’s just a rosary,” I lied.

“Well you’d best start praying. You’re going to need Jesus, Mary and Joseph and anyone else you can find.” With that, she snatched the shanghaied pitch pipe, grabbed me by the left ear and threw me into the Choir loft closet. Slamming the door shut she wailed: *“Mortuus es mini - You are dead to me.”*



